

The "Victory" of the Urabeños: The New Face of Colombian Organized Crime

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1. Introduction

The mad scramble for criminal power in the aftermath of the demobilization of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) is over. The Urabeños, or as they prefer to call themselves, the "Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia," have won.

Following the completion of the AUC demobilization in 2006, more than 30 new criminal groups, known as the "BACRIM" (for the Spanish for criminal bands – "bandas criminales") were born. Over the last eight years it has been a war to the death between these groups for hegemony. The winners, the Urabeños, are the perfect amalgamation of Colombian organized crime. While they were born from the demobilization of the AUC, much of the Urabeños' criminal pedigree goes much further back. Many of their members, before joining the paramilitaries, were part of one of the three main Marxist rebel groups, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN) or the People's Liberation Army (EPL). And many others, particularly on the drug trafficking side, can trace their criminal history back to the Medellín Cartel, which pioneered the cocaine trade almost 40 years ago. The Urabeños encompass three generations of criminal expertise, melded into a hybrid structure forged by the current situation in Colombia.

Does this mean that Colombian organized crime has come full circle? Ever since Pablo Escobar was killed on a Medellín rooftop in 1993, organized crime has continued to fragment. Yet now, once again, a single criminal syndicate dominates the underworld. The Urabeños, though, are not a hierarchical, integrated criminal organization with a unified and central command structure. As shall be seen in Section 2, where the structure of the BACRIM is defined, Colombia's National Police face a very different challenge than they did with the Medellín Cartel.

The success of Colombia's security forces against drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) cannot be underestimated. Under constant pressure, Colombian organized crime has evolved and mutated. The result of this constant evolution is the Urabeños. It is a criminal network, built around a series of units, or "nodes." The basic building block of this network is the "oficina de cobro," a peculiarly Colombian manifestation of organized crime that, as with so many things in the underworld, traces its roots back to the Medellín Cartel.

If one node of the structure is taken out, the network simply shifts, with new nodes taking over the roles of their dismantled predecessors. This is true even in the case of command nodes, such as those formerly headed by Urabeños founder Daniel Rendón Herrera, alias "Don Mario," and that of the next leader, Juan de Dios Usuga, alias "Giovanni."

Another result of Colombia's increasingly efficient police force is the phenomenon of criminal migration, or "the cockroach effect." Turn on the lights in a room and the cockroaches run for the dark corners. The lights have been turned on in Colombia, and the criminal cockroaches have, in many cases, moved abroad. While

the Mexicans now dominate the traditional cocaine market of the United States, the Colombians have been developing and exploiting new markets. They have targeted not only the European Union, but booming domestic markets far closer to home, those of Latin America's most populous nations: Brazil, Argentina and Colombia itself.

As coca crops have been reduced in Colombia, the balloon effect has led to increased drug cultivation in Peru, now the world's top cocaine producer, and in neighboring Bolivia. And at almost every link in the drug chain in these two Andean nations, you will find a Colombian.

The Colombians remain the pioneers of the world's drug trade. The Mexican cartels may now overshadow their Colombian counterparts in terms of power and military capacity, but the fragmentation of organized crime in Colombia is being replicated in Mexico. The recent capture of Mexico's so-called Pablo Escobar, Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzmán, of the mighty Sinaloa cartel, will simply accelerate this process.

As more members of the Urabeños' central command (its "Estado Mayor" or "board of directors") get taken down, it is likely that the domination exercised by those from Colombia's banana-growing heartland will be eclipsed, and the criminal network that currently exists may take on a different name. The evolution of Colombian organized crime is constant, and will remain so as long as the vast profits are available. Cocaine is no longer the sole, or perhaps even the primary element of the Urabeños' criminal portfolio. Gold mining, extortion, human trafficking, gambling and prostitution all provide criminal revenues, to name but a few. No longer can the National Police focus its attention solely on the cocaine trade. The Urabeños look for any criminal opportunity, and exploit it swiftly and efficiently. The police must keep up, and in the case of the gold industry, for example, they are trailing behind, hamstrung by the lack of adequate legislation and tools to combat this illegal industry.

2. Defining the BACRIM

The name BACRIM was created by the government of former president Alvaro Uribe in the aftermath of the demobilization of the AUC. Then-president Uribe was keen to draw a line in the sand, to avoid undermining the AUC peace process. For this reason, any drug trafficking organizations post-2006 were not to be considered paramilitary groups, but rather, "criminal bands," ("bandas criminales" – BACRIM). Yet all but one of the BACRIM had their roots in the AUC. The exception that proves the rule was the Rastrojos, which emerged from the military wing of a faction of the Norte del Valle Cartel (NDVC).

Today, the term BACRIM is used to describe a vast array of different criminal groups and enterprises - essentially any criminal structure not linked to the Marxist rebels. In January 2011, former National Police Chief General Oscar Naranjo described the BACRIM as the principal threat to Colombia.¹ However, given the wide use of the term, it is necessary to define what constitutes a BACRIM, and how they fit into the criminal pecking order in Colombia.

The Third Generation of Colombian Drug Trafficking Organizations

The BACRIM are the third generation of Colombian drug trafficking organizations (DTOs). The first generation was made up of the Medellín and Cali Cartels. These cartels were vertically integrated, hierarchical organizations with a clearly marked command structure that was able to manage, in a centralized manner, all the different links in the drug chain, from drug crops to distribution in the US.

The second generation of DTOs was made up of federations, comprised of "baby" cartels. These baby cartels tended to specialize in certain links in the drug chain. The Norte del Valle Cartel, an association of drug traffickers whose roots lay in the Cali Cartel, was an example of this, as were the AUC. Neither the NDVC nor the AUC had one clear boss. These were federations of drug traffickers and mafiosos that worked together, and, in many cases, ended up fighting each other.

The BACRIM thus constitute the third generation of Colombian drug trafficking syndicates, and are markedly different from their predecessors. The growing role of the Mexicans means the earning power of the BACRIM in the cocaine trade to the US is but a fraction of that of the first and second generation drug trafficking organizations. The BACRIM now deliver cocaine shipments destined for the US market to the Mexicans, usually in Central America (Honduras is one of the principal handover points). This means that the BACRIM sell a kilo of cocaine in Honduras for around \$12,000. The Mexicans then earn more than double that selling wholesale within the US and many times more if they get involved in distribution.

¹ Semana, "Las bandas criminales son la principal amenaza para el país," January 25, 2011.
<http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/las-bandas-criminales-principal-amenaza-para-pais-general-naranjo/234587-3>

This has contributed to the diversification of the BACRIM criminal portfolios. Whereas the first and second-generation DTOs earned the lion's share of their money from the exportation of cocaine, the BACRIM perhaps gain half of their revenue from this. This means that their structures and capabilities are far different from those of their predecessors, which were designed solely for the production, transportation and sale of cocaine on international markets. The BACRIM are now engaged in a wide range of criminal activities: extortion, gold mining, micro-trafficking, gambling, contraband smuggling and human trafficking, among others.

The Narcos and the Enforcers

There is often a difference between the drug traffickers and the enforcers who regulate this illegal industry. Any market needs regulation, an authority to ensure that agreements are respected, debts are paid and deliveries made. In the markets for legal goods, it is the state that provides these services. In illegal markets, participants cannot turn to the state when agreements are broken, products stolen or payment refused. And criminal elements, by definition, tend not to be very trustworthy -- hence the high levels of violence associated with organized crime. In the days of the Medellín Cartel, Pablo Escobar served as judge, jury, and executioner in the cocaine world, regulating (and taxing) transactions.

With the fragmentation of the drug trade and the birth of the baby cartels and the second-generation DTOs after 1995, the scope for betrayal and conflict in the drug world became infinitely greater. After 1997, the AUC became the principal regulator of Colombia's drug trade. Heavily armed, with institutional links to the military and elements of the police force on the payroll, the paramilitaries became the "law" in Colombia's underworld, settling disputes. As the AUC expanded, many narcos joined the umbrella group, and many paramilitary commanders moved from serving as protection to working as drug traffickers in their own right. Thus the line between narco and enforcer became blurred.

With today's BACRIM, the difference between the narco and the enforcer has again become relevant. While many Urabeños leaders are narcos in their own right, this BACRIM also provides services to other narcos who are not part of its core structure. There are drug traffickers in Medellín, often referred to as "Los Invisibles" by the police, who have direct links to the mighty Mexican cartels. They have access to coca and can subcontract laboratory work to get cocaine. However, they do not have the power to move that cocaine from the laboratory to a departure point without risk of seizure. They do not have the power to prevent other criminals from stealing their product en route. They do not have the power to ensure the transporters do not steal their shipments.

This is where the BACRIM fit in. The BACRIM are principally armed groups. They do have territorial control and they do control movement corridors across the country. They can secure departure points and they do have the ability to punish anybody that interferes with the flow of narcotics.

The BACRIM within Colombian organized crime

We have broken down Colombian organized crime into four different levels, with the BACRIM at the top. Using the criteria outlined here, it is clear that many groups described as BACRIM have been misidentified, and are positioned, according to our analysis, further down the criminal food chain.

Type of criminal organization	Structure	Geography	Criminal Activities	Capacity for violence	Penetration/ corruption of state
Pandilla	Mostly street gangs, with four members or more dedicated to criminal activity	Usually several city blocks, with the strongest perhaps controlling a neighborhood	Muggings, burglary, micro-extortion, local drug dealing	Most gang members will have access to some basic weaponry, but little training or planning capability	Limited, perhaps some local policemen who will take bribes to ignore criminal activity
Combo/ banda	Could be made up of several pandillas or one or more groups specialized in a particular criminal activity. These groups can also supply services to more sophisticated criminal groups.	Often have city neighborhoods as strongholds, but criminal activity could be spread across a wider area. Usually based in one municipality.	Specialized criminal activities like car theft, but also extortion and local drug dealing.	Likely to have more discipline than the street gangs and access to better weaponry.	May have members who have served in the police or army and have some basic military skills.
Oficina de cobro	This is a sophisticated criminal structure with different components and a wider range of criminal activities. It has its own armed wing capable of carrying out assassinations and armed actions. It also has a dedicated money laundering capability. Oficinas almost always have links to drug trafficking and provide services to transnational criminal organizations as well as BACRIM.	Oficinas can be rural as well as urban, and can call upon the services of affiliated pandillas and combos. An oficina at its most basic level will control a city district or rural area, while the most sophisticated control entire cities. They can have a presence in more than one municipality	Extortion, kidnappings, debt collection, administration of local justice, micro-trafficking, sicarios (hired assassin) services, prostitution, gambling, money laundering; can provide services related to some links in the drug trafficking chain (laboratories, access to drug crops etc)	An oficina will have its own group of sicarios. These will have basic weapons training and the ability to plan assassinations and armed actions. Usually have access to sophisticated weaponry, certainly assault rifles. Often have knowledge of explosives and can rig car bombs and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs).	Can penetrate police and army units at the highest levels. Some oficinas have had local police chiefs on the payroll. Also can influence local politics and get members of the judiciary and judges on their side.

BACRIM	This is a criminal structure capable of transnational criminal activity and able to provide a wide variety of services to drug traffickers. It consists of several different cells spread across a wide geographical area, with several armed components, personnel dedicated to paying off state functionaries, money laundering capabilities and the ability to carry out, or subcontract, a wide array of criminal activities. It is a criminal network rather than a hierarchical, integrated organization.	Usually has a presence in several departments. The weakest BACRIM have a regional presence; the strongest have a national reach and the ability to operate across the country. Many BACRIM also have cells in foreign countries capable of moving shipments and laundering money.	Drug trafficking, illegal gold mining, kidnapping, extortion, arms trafficking, providing services for all links of the drug chain in-country (purchase coca base, process cocaine, move shipments within country) and may also be able to engage in transnational transport of drug shipments.	Can call upon highly trained and well armed units, often made up of former members of the security forces. These units are able to carry out conventional military actions, have specialized weaponry and explosives skills. Some BACRIM can carry out these operations internationally.	Can penetrate the state at a regional and even national level. Have the ability to corrupt high level officials in the security forces, local, regional and national government, the Attorney General's Office, the judiciary and customs.
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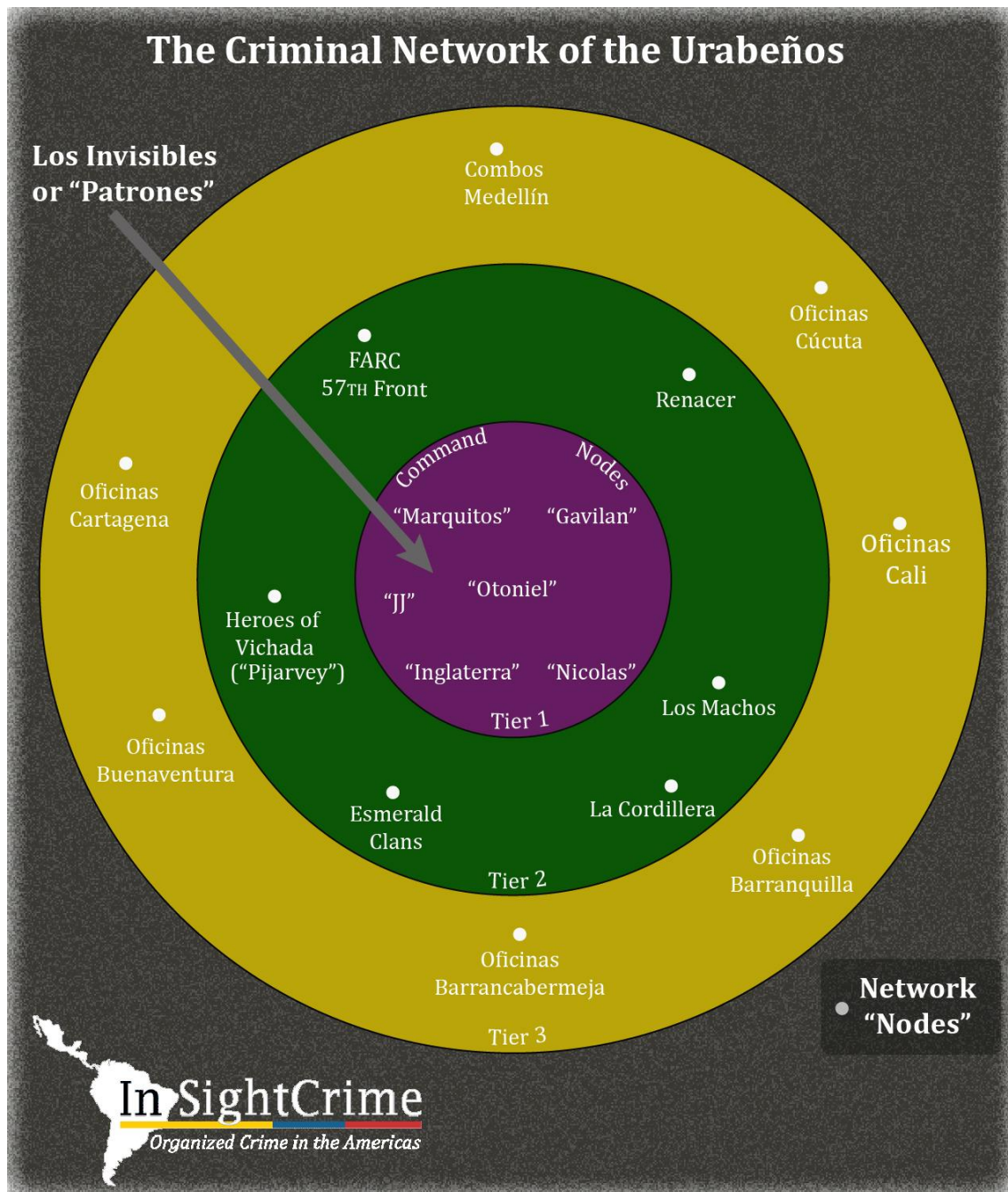
The BACRIM: a criminal network

Whereas the first generation cartels were vertically integrated and hierarchical organizations and the second generation were federations of baby cartels and paramilitary groups, the BACRIM are criminal networks that operate like franchises. They are made up of many different groups or “nodes,” all operating under the same umbrella, but often dedicated to different activities.

Criminal networks are far more fluid enterprises than the cartels or federations, with members coming and going depending on the services they offer and the criminal market that exists for those services. These networks are made up of different units or nodes that are interconnected for the purposes of business advancement and facilitation.² The current head of the Urabeños, Darío Antonio Úsuga, alias “Otoniel,” does not have direct control over even a tithe of the units that currently call themselves Urabeños. And only a tiny fraction of elements have any contact with Otoniel and his command node that sits at the heart of the **Urabeños network**.

² One of the best studies on the nature of these criminal networks can be found in Phil William's paper “Transnational Criminal Networks,” RAND (2001).

The Urabeños network is a directed network, comprised of three tiers:



At the top is the command node headed by Otoniel and the senior military commanders of the organization, which form part of the "board of directors," or as they describe themselves using guerrilla terminology, the "Estado Mayor" (General Staff). Senior drug traffickers who are part of the Urabeños also sit at this level of the network. Past examples have included Henry de Jesus Lopez, alias "Mi Sangre," (captured in Argentina in October 2012) and Camilo Torres Martinez, alias "Fritanga," (captured in Colombia in July 2012). A current example is Carlos Alberto Moreno Tuberquia, alias "Nicolas."

At the second level are the Urabeños' regional lieutenants, responsible for controlling certain territories and providing services that facilitate drug trafficking, including: providing access to drug crops, protecting laboratories, moving drug shipments and securing departure points. These regional lieutenants tend to be financially self-sufficient, running their own criminal enterprises in their territory, including extortion, micro-trafficking, gold mining, etc. But their primary role in the Urabeños franchise is to facilitate drug trafficking.

The third tier of the organization is the subcontracted labor. This includes a host of different criminal groups. The majority of these are oficinas de cobro, but some may be combos/bandas, which are hired to carry out specific tasks for the Urabeños. Those working at this level might use the name of the Urabeños to carry out their own criminal activities, and may be able to call upon the network for support if they get into trouble with the law or rival gangs. It is usually the regional command nodes that contract out this work, insulating the central command nodes from this criminal activity. The vast majority of Urabeños arrests come from this tier, and yet really they are not integral members of the BACRIM and have no connection with the board of directors. The Urabeños also provide services to other drug traffickers or criminal interests, and indeed use other criminal groups, like the FARC, where necessary, or profitable. An example of this is the 57th Front, which sits astride the border with Panama. The Urabeños deliver drug shipments to the guerrillas, who then move them into Panama, where they are received by other members of the Urabeños network.³

Outside of the core Urabeños network are different drug traffickers who use the services provided by the BACRIM. These are part of the wider drug trafficking network in Colombia. They are affiliated with the Urabeños, in the sense that they are either part of the franchise, or take advantage of the services provided.

The basic unit of the Urabeños network is the oficina de cobro, be it rural or urban. One example is the group Renacer. While described by the police as a BACRIM, Renacer was actually little more than a rural oficina de cobro that operated in Chocó. It did not run its own international drug routes. Initially, Renacer worked with the Rastrojos; now, it is affiliated with the Urabeños.

The expansion of any BACRIM is based on its ability to persuade oficinas de cobro across Colombia (and increasingly abroad) to become affiliated with the franchise and provide services to the network. This model was initially pioneered by the Rastrojos, who after 2006 engaged in rapid expansion across the country, making agreements with local oficinas de cobro previously part of the AUC. These oficinas de cobro usually remain intact after affiliation, simply branding themselves according to the BACRIM franchise they are working with. This has been seen with oficinas de cobro in places like Barrancabermeja, which have changed hats with remarkable speed, starting life as part of the AUC, then becoming Aguilas Negras, later Rastrojos and today branding themselves as Urabeños.

³ InSight Crime interview with Colombian police intelligence sources

While the line from paramilitary to BACRIM is easy to trace, and in many places the BACRIM are simply known as the same old "paracos" (common slang for paramilitaries), the truth is that the BACRIM are very different from their AUC predecessors. The AUC's control of a region involved a highly visible presence with patrols carried out by uniformed troops carrying high caliber weapons, employing roadblocks and bases. The AUC had a professed anti-subversive ideology, and an ambitious political project that saw up to a third of Colombia's congress stacked with their allies. The BACRIM, on the other hand, lurk in the shadows, with civilian clothing and small arms. They are more reliant on intelligence networks than a visible military presence. Their commanders are faceless and hidden, with their names whispered throughout the communities they operate in. While they certainly backed candidates for the congressional elections in March 2014,⁴ they did this on an ad hoc basis, with different "nodes" seeking to get allies into power in their areas of influence. However, they did this more for the protection these politicians could provide to criminal operations than for any political program.

The BACRIM, unlike the AUC, do not have the military capability to take on the guerrillas, and they have no real desire to do so either. While the Urabeños still have some units of shock troops they can deploy, most of their members do not have the same military training that the paramilitaries once boasted. The military wing of the BACRIM is now the "sicarios," and while they are able to carry out sophisticated assassinations, they are not capable of military style attacks in a rural setting against the guerrillas. There have been few cases of serious BACRIM/guerrilla clashes, and those registered have been motivated by competition over criminal resources, such as coca crops.⁵

The BACRIM's social role and integration into communities has also changed substantially compared with the AUC. Members of the AUC were commonly integrated into the business and social elites of many regions, who often invited them in to combat kidnapping and extortion by guerrillas. A number of prominent AUC commanders began as businessmen or members of the social elite.⁶ The same is not true today.

There is a perception in certain regions that the BACRIM are a political force, since their violence often targets unionists, land restitution activists, and social movements that threaten business interests. The most likely reason for focusing their violence on these groups, however, is that the BACRIM operate as guns for hire. They are utilized by business and criminal interests to terrorize or eliminate opponents, but this does not mean these "political" actions are an inherent function of their existence.

Within the criminal network model, the BACRIM command often does not have total control over the self-financing regional nodes, and still less over the oficinas de cobro that are affiliated to the franchise and form the third tier of the structure.

⁴ Caracol, "Elegidos 69 candidatos cuestionados por presuntos nexos con ilegales," March 10, 2014.

<http://www.caracol.com.co/noticias/actualidad/8203elegidos-69-candidatos-cuestionados-por-presuntos-nexos-con-ilegales/20140310/nota/2120176.aspx>

⁵ El Tiempo, "Bandas Criminales siembran minas en varias zonas del país," May 2013, http://www.eltiempo.com/justicia/campos-minados-por-bandas-criminales-en-el-el-nudo-de-paramillo_12825863-4

⁶ See for example Rodrigo Tovar Pupo, alias "Jorge 40," and Raul Emilio Hasbun, alias "Pedro Bonito"

This means that the behavior of BACRIM units can vary drastically from region to region. In some areas, particularly the Urabeños heartland of Urabá and Córdoba, there is more continuity with the paramilitary era than in others.

3. The Evolution of the Urabeños

Urabá, which means "promised land" in the indigenous tongue, was the cradle of the paramilitaries, and remains the country's principal BACRIM stronghold. This is where most of the Urabeños command nodes still meet, and it is the seat of the organization's "board of directors," or Estado Mayor. The region is crucial drug trafficking real estate, providing access to coca crops located in the Nudo de Paramillo, the mountains of Bolívar and the jungles of Chocó. It sits astride one of the most important drug movement corridors from the center of the country to the departure points on both the Pacific and Atlantic seaboard. Finally, it has a culture of illegality that stretches from the formation of the Marxist rebels in the 1960s, if not before, which provides fertile ground for today's BACRIM to flourish.

The evolution of the Urabeños can be broadly divided into three phases: 1) the period from the group's foundation to the arrest of Daniel Rendón alias "Don Mario" (2006-2009); 2) the rise and fall of Juan de Dios Úsuga, alias "Giovanni" (2009-2012); 3) the implosion of the Rastrojos (2012-2013).

a. Foundation to arrest of Daniel Rendón alias "Don Mario" (2006-2009)

The Castaño family founded the paramilitary movement in the early 1990s. It was likely the last of the Castaños, Vicente, founded what was to become the Urabeños.

Vicente Castaño refused to turn himself in when then-President Alvaro Uribe scooped up the AUC leadership in 2006 and locked them in a facility in La Ceja, Antioquia. Vicente called the government action a betrayal, and set about rebuilding his power base. He turned to two trusted lieutenants: Daniel Rendón Herrera, alias "Don Mario," and Ever Veloza Garcia, alias "HH." The first was a money man, who had run the finances of the AUC's Centauros Bloc. He was also from Amalfi, the birthplace of the Castaños. HH on the other hand, had been with Vicente Castaño right from the foundation of the paramilitaries in 1994. He was his hatchet man, and a trusted military commander.⁷

The other paramilitary commanders, who had obeyed the government conditions, were unhappy at the prospect of Vicente Castaño scooping up their business, territory and drug routes. A contract was taken out on Castaño's life by the Oficina de Envigado, most likely with the involvement of HH, who may have betrayed his old boss. Vicente Castaño was killed in March 2007,⁸ most likely at his farm in Córdoba.

This left Don Mario. He set up shop in Urabá, where his brother, Fredy, alias "El Aleman," had commanded the AUC's 2,000 strong Elmer Cardenas Bloc. El Aleman demobilized 1,500 of these fighters during three separate demobilization ceremonies in 2006. Don Mario knew many of these soldiers personally and quickly cobbled together a formidable fighting force of around 80 men. He then

⁷ McDermott interviewed Ever Veloza on multiple occasions in Itagui prison on the outskirts of Medellín during 2008.

⁸ Jeremy McDermott, 'Revealed: The secrets of Colombia's murderous Castaño brothers', November 7, 2008. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/southamerica/colombia/3391789/Revealed-The-secrets-of-Colombias-murderous-Castano-brothers.html>

monopolized this important drug route, taxing traffickers for every kilo of cocaine that passed through his territory. It was a lucrative business. The tax was \$400 per kilo.⁹ And with up to 20 go-fast boats leaving the Gulf every week, each capable of carrying two tons of cocaine, Don Mario was making close to \$20 million per month. The Urabeños were in business, along with more than 30 other BACRIM identified by the police.

Don Mario sought to expand from his Urabá heartland and moved south into the strategic region of Bajo Cauca and Medellín. He met resistance from other BACRIM, principally Los Paisas and the Oficina de Envigado. Then, in May 2008, President Alvaro Uribe extradited 15 top paramilitary leaders to the United States, claiming they were violating the conditions of the peace process. Much of the criminal underworld was now up for grabs and the BACRIM came into their own.

Don Mario had powerful friends, among them Guillermo Valencia Cossio, brother of then-Interior Minister Fabio Valencia Cossio, who ran the Attorney General's Office in Medellín. However, he made too many enemies too quickly. His organization, which he called the "Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia" (the name Urabeños is a police invention) ended up embroiled in conflict with the Paisas, the Oficina de Envigado and the Rastrojos.

Don Mario needed help moving into Medellín and he required top level drug traffickers to increase his earnings. He reached out to one man who could help him with both problems: Henry de Jesus Lopez, alias "Mi Sangre".¹⁰ Don Mario had met Mi Sangre while working for another Castaño associate and Amalfi native, Miguel Arroyave, the head of the AUC's Centaurs Bloc who was looking to set up shop in Bogotá. Mi Sangre, whose roots lay in the Medellín mafia, the Oficina de Envigado, had been



⁹ Semana, 'En pie de guerra', April 19, 2008. http://www.semana.com/wf_InfoArticulo.aspx?idArt=111095

¹⁰ See InSight Crime profile of Mi Sangre: <http://www.insightcrime.org/personalities-colombia/henry-de-jesus-lopez-mi-sangre>
www.InSightCrime.org

sent to Bogotá to work with Arroyave setting up the AUC's Capital Bloc, which aimed to establish a number of oficinas de cobro in the capital.

Don Mario's antics had attracted the attention of the security forces. By late 2008, the government's reward for information leading to his capture had reached \$1.5 million. He was the public face of the BACRIM.

It did not take the Colombian police long to track Don Mario down; he was captured in April 2009. By this time, however, the Urabeños had secured a presence in the provinces of Chocó, Antioquia and Cordoba, and had probing teams in the cities of Medellín, Cartagena and Santa Marta. Scouts had been dispatched to the provinces of Norte de Santander, Bolívar, Cesar and La Guajira, where the Urabeños were moving drugs with the help of other groups.

The Urabeños now numbered close to 350, most of them ex-AUC members. With allies included, the Urabeños could call on up to 1,000 armed men. Don Mario had put the Urabeños on the map, but they were still just one of over a dozen major BACRIM.



BACRIM PRESENCE 2008

b. The rise and fall of Juan de Dios Úsuga, alias “Giovanni” (2009-2012)

It could be said that the capture of Don Mario was the best thing that could have happened to the Urabeños. Firstly, the security force pressure came off -- with Don Mario in custody, the police turned their attention elsewhere. Secondly, Don Mario

was replaced by a leader with far greater ability and cunning: Juan de Dios Úsuga, alias "Giovanni".

Giovanni and his brother, Dario Antonio Úsuga, alias "Otoniel," were part of key personnel within the AUC who had previously been rebels of the People's Liberation Army (EPL). The EPL demobilized in 1991, but its members came under pressure from the FARC in Urabá, who hunted down ex-EPL rebels as traitors to the revolutionary cause.¹¹ Many former EPL fighters ended up in the arms of the nascent paramilitary movement, becoming founding members of the first paramilitary unit, the Peasant Self-Defense Forces of Córdoba and Urabá (Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá – ACCU). The ACCU would later form the nucleus of the AUC, which was founded in 1997. Giovanni had worked with the AUC's Calima Bloc in Cauca, to watch over the Castaños' interests there,¹² while Otoniel worked with Don Mario and the Centaurs Bloc in Meta.

Giovanni gathered other former EPL guerrillas, among them Roberto Vargas Gutiérrez, alias "Gavilán"; Francisco José Morela Peñate, alias "Negro Sarley"; Jacinto Nicolas Fuentes German, alias "Don Leo," and Melquisedec Henao Ciro, alias "Belisario," among others. This group of former guerrillas became the disciplined and capable military core of the Urabeños and members of its "Estado Mayor."

It was at this point that the expansion of the Urabeños began in earnest, with trusted lieutenants sent from Urabá to take control of strategic drug trafficking real estate, preferably through alliances and agreements, but otherwise through violence.

Mi Sangre was a key player in this expansion. He ran large quantities of cocaine out of northwestern Colombia and up to Mexican cartels, principally the Zetas. He worked with an old friend and "Oficina de Envigado" associate, Maximiliano Bonilla Orozco, alias "Valenciano," who not only had power in Medellín as head of one faction of the Oficina de Envigado, but also ran one of the splinter groups of the Paisas along the Caribbean coast.¹³ The Urabeños were able to provide Valenciano with arms and ammunition to help him fight rival factions of the Oficina de Envigado in Medellín. In return Valenciano gave them access to his international cocaine connections.¹⁴ The contacts gave the Urabeños access to new routes, new clients and more money.

The guerrilla background of the group's leadership provided the Urabeños high command with a better understanding of how to set up links with local communities in areas where they operated, and also gave them an advantage when dealing with the FARC, the ELN and the dissident faction of the EPL that still operates in Norte de Santander.¹⁵ Relations with these rebel groups are now

¹¹ Robin Kirk, "More Terrible than Death," 2003

¹² Profile of Don Berna: <http://www.insightcrime.org/personalities-colombia/don-berna>

¹³ Profile of Valenciano: <http://www.insightcrime.org/personalities-colombia/maximiliano-bonilla-orozco-valenciano>

¹⁴ Profile of the Zetas: <http://www.insightcrime.org/groups-mexico/zetas>

¹⁵ InSight Crime, "Colombia's Forgotten Rebels Now at the Heart of Drug Trade," InSight Crime, August 13, 2011.

<http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/colombias-forgotten-rebels-now-at-the-heart-of-drug-trade>

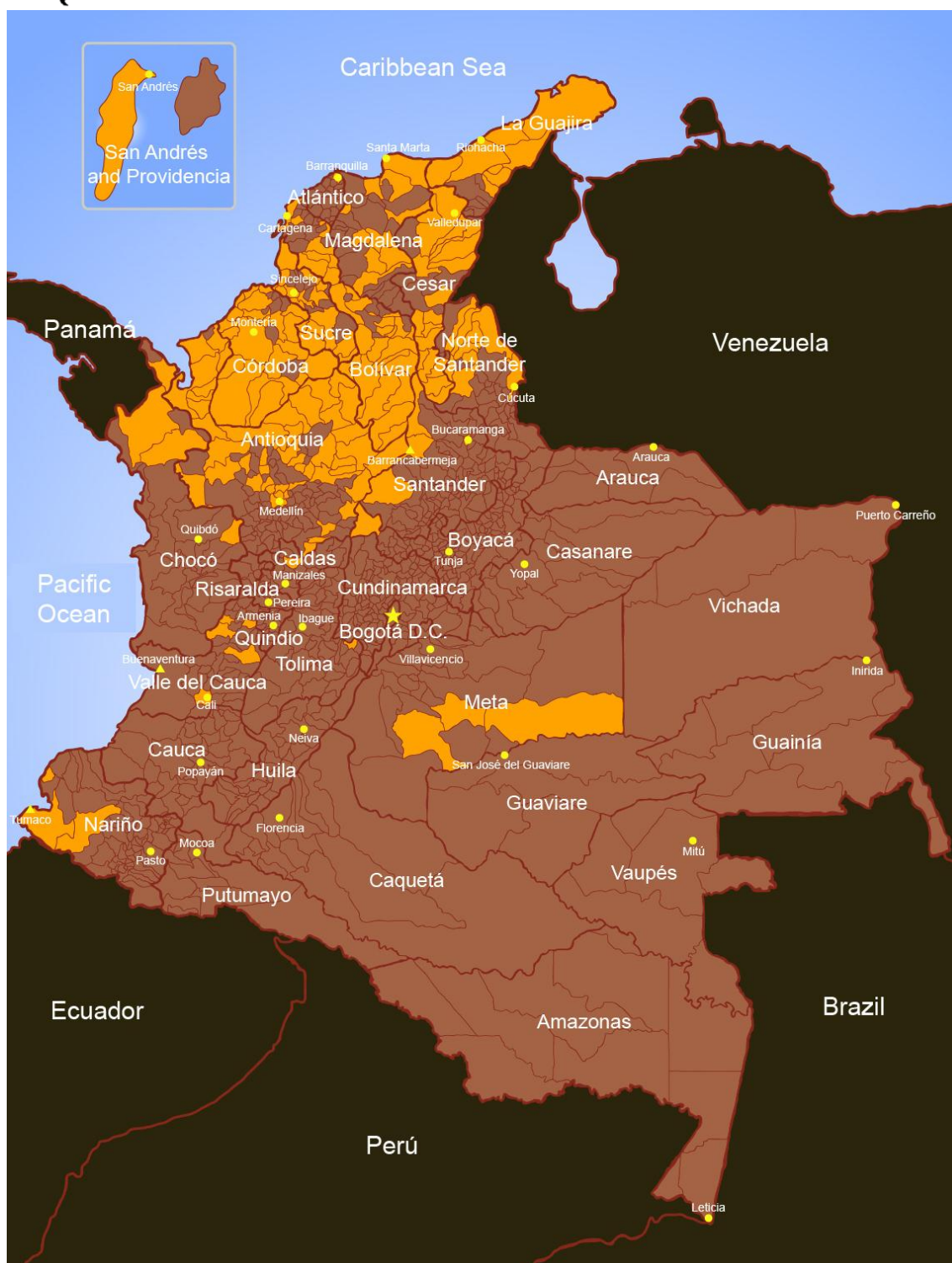
essential for the BACRIM, as the guerrillas control much of the drug crops in the country and supply coca base to the BACRIM. Their territorial control also means that the Urabeños sometimes have to move shipments through rebel territory.

The Urabeños not only forged agreements with "Valenciano" and his Paisas, but with several other criminal players: the BACRIM of Alta Guajira, run by Arnulfo Sánchez González, alias "Pablo,"¹⁶ and the Oficina del Caribe (run by family members of extradited AUC leader Hernán Giraldo).

By the end of 2010, the Urabeños were in a much stronger position than Don Mario had left them in. They controlled most of the main routes from Medellín north to the Caribbean. They had also managed to open another major land route to the Atlantic, via the department of Cesar, which links the center of the country to the Venezuelan border and the coast. In short, they had become one of the top three BACRIM in the country, trailing only the Rastrojos and the Popular Revolutionary Anti-Terrorist Army of Colombia (Ejército Revolucionario Popular Antiterrorista Colombiano– ERPAC).¹⁷

¹⁶ InSight Crime, "La Guajira: Dynamics of a Conflict," November 21, 2010, <http://www.insightcrime.org/investigations/la-guajira-dynamics-of-the-conflict>

¹⁷ See InSight Crime's ERPAC profile: <http://www.insightcrime.org/groups-colombia/erpac>



Urabeños areas of influence, 2011

c. The implosion of the Rastrojos (2012-2013)

By 2011, the Rastrojos were the most powerful BACRIM and the dominant criminal power in the Colombian drug trafficking world. By the end of that year, they had a

presence in up to 23 of Colombia's 32 departments¹⁸ by some estimates, and had a rural military force estimated to be in excess of 1,000 fighters¹⁹, as well as control over many oficinas de cobro, sicarios and money laundering networks.

¹⁸ Indepaz, "Informe sobre la presencia de narcoparamilitares 2011," 2011, http://www.indepaz.org.co/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/722_VII-Informe-presencia-narcoparamilitarismo-2011-INDEPAZ.pdf

¹⁹ InSight Crime, "Comba Cuts Deal and Rastrojos Lose Ground," May 8, 2012, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/comba-cuts-a-deal-and-the-rastrojos-lose-ground>



Rastrojos areas of influence, 2011

They controlled the principal trafficking networks in the west, and the north east, with only parts of the Caribbean coast and the Eastern Plains lying outside their influence. Working closely with the drug trafficker Daniel "Loco" Barrera, they had established a plethora of international contacts. They had also secured a presence outside the borders of Colombia, controlling trafficking in Ecuador and on both

sides of the Venezuelan border. Under the leadership of the Calle Serna brothers (Javier, Luis Enrique and Juan Carlos) as well as Diego Henao, alias "Diego Rastrojo," the rise of the Rastrojos had been meteoric. Their downfall would be equally precipitous.

In November 2011, the Rastrojos and the Urabeños negotiated what at the time appeared to be a ground breaking truce, dividing up criminal territories between them and seeking to finish a war that had cost both sides dearly. There is evidence that a meeting was set up between the groups in Bajo Cauca, where the entire top command of the Urabeños negotiated with local Rastrojos leaders and emissaries sent from Valle del Cauca, the Rastrojos headquarters. The agreement left the Urabeños in control of Bajo Cauca in return for ceding Cúcuta, on the Venezuelan border, and withdrawing their support for Rastrojos enemies in Valle del Cauca.²⁰

However, this agreement never had a chance to consolidate. At the start of 2012, persistent rumors emerged that Javier Calle Serna, alias "Comba," was negotiating with the US authorities.²¹ Suddenly, the Rastrojos empire seemed to be built on shifting sands. In May 2012, Comba turned himself in to the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).²² Just one month later, Diego Rastrojo was arrested in Venezuela.²³ The last leader who could potentially have held the organization together, Comba's brother Luis Calle Serna, turned himself in to the authorities in October.²⁴ This occurred just a month after the loss of the group's key international trafficking connection, Daniel Barrera, who was arrested in Venezuela that September.²⁵

This string of surrenders and arrests was akin to the 2008 extradition of the AUC high command. Suddenly, huge chunks of Colombia's drug trafficking world were up for grabs. The Urabeños seized the opportunity. They appeared everywhere, even breaking into the Rastrojos heartland on the Pacific coast and making alliances with oficinas de cobro in Cali and in the strategic port of Buenaventura. With the region of Bajo Cauca now under their control, they were able to send more fighters and resources to other parts of the country, looking to take over crucial crossing points into Venezuela in Norte de Santander department, and expanding once again into the Eastern Plains.

However, the Urabeños did not have it all their own way. The Colombian police have chalked up a series of significant victories against this BACRIM. Giovanni, the mastermind of the Urabeños consolidation and expansion, was killed in a raid by security forces on News Years Day in 2012.²⁶ To this loss has been added the

²⁰ InSight Crime interviews with police intelligence sources, August 30, 2012, later confirmed by independent sources in Caucasia

²¹ InSight Crime, "Comba Cuts Deal and Rastrojos Lose Ground," May 8, 2012, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/comba-cuts-a-deal-and-the-rastrojos-lose-ground>

²² InSight Crime, "Comba Cuts Deal and Rastrojos Lose Ground," May 8, 2012, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/comba-cuts-a-deal-and-the-rastrojos-lose-ground>

²³ InSight Crime, "Rastrojos Founder Captured in Venezuela," June 4, 2012, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/rastrojos-founder-captured-in-venezuela>

²⁴ InSight Crime, "Last Rastrojos Surrenders to US," October 5, 2012, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/last-rastrojos-leader-surrenders-to-us>

²⁵ InSight Crime, "Capture of 'Loco' Barrera is end of an Era for Colombia," September 19, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/loco-barrera-captured-venezuela>

²⁶ InSight Crime, "Urabeños Leader Killed but Expansion Likely to Continue," January 2, 2013, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/urabenos-leader-killed-but-expansion-likely-to-continue>

arrests of Giovanni's brothers, Juan Diego and John Fernando, alias "Simon," in May 2012, and that of another relative, Alexander Montoya Úsuga, alias "El Flaco," in July 2012.²⁷ Mi Sangre and Belisario were also taken out of action, the former arrested in Argentina in October 2012,²⁸ and the latter captured in Colombia that same month.²⁹ In February 2013, Don Leo was captured in Peru.³⁰ El Negro Sarley³¹ was killed in a shootout with police in April 2013.

The net around Otoniel has also begun to tighten. He was almost discovered when the police went to the town of Blanquizet, in Urabá, in December 2013 to arrest his nephew, Arley Úsuga Torres, alias "07," who was, along with those listed above, a member of the Urabeños' Estado Mayor.³² Otoniel was apparently attending a meeting of the Estado Mayor when the police arrived in helicopters. Also arrested in December, this time in Medellín, was Otoniel's sister, Nini Johana Úsuga. The police are using the same tactics that have been deployed successfully against other drug lords, hitting support networks and close collaborators in order to leave the principal target increasingly exposed.

²⁷ InSight Crime, "Brother of Urabeños Chief to Face Extradition to US," February 1, 2013, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/brother-urabenos-chief-face-extradition>

²⁸ InSight Crime, "Colombia Capo 'Mi Sangre' Captured in Argentina," October 31, 2012, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/mi-sangre-captured-argentina>

²⁹ Semana "Capturado alias 'Belisario,' jefe de los Urabeños in Magdalena," October 1, 2012, <http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/capturado-alias-belisario-jefe-urabenos-magdalena/265633-3>

³⁰ InSight Crime, "Arrest of Colombian Capo in Peru Could Swing Battle for Medellín," February 7, 2013, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/arrest-colombian-capo-peru-swing-battle-medellin>

³¹ InSight Crime, "Urabeños Boss Killed in Shootout with Police," April 26, 2013, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/urabenos-commander-killed-shootout-colombia-police>

³² InSight Crime, "Colombia's Police Tighten Noose around Urabeños Leader," December 13, 2013, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/colombias-police-tighten-noose-around-urabenos-leader>



Urabeños areas of influence, 2013.

4. The last BACRIM standing: the Urabeños today

Today the Urabeños are the only BACRIM with a national reach. They are also arguably the only real BACRIM still standing. While the government recognizes the existence of three BACRIM -- the Urabeños, the Rastrojos and the ERPAC dissidents -- the truth is that the Rastrojos are now fragmented into different factions, with no united leadership, while the most powerful of the ERPAC dissident groups, "Heroes of Vichada," is working with the Urabeños.

The Urabeños are now organized into eight different blocs, across the entire nation. However, this does not mean that Otoniel exerts direct control over all the elements within these blocs. Otoniel is simply the head of the Urabeños' board of directors. The other members of the board, many regional chiefs, are financially self-sufficient. They run all manner of criminal activities in their criminal fiefdoms. Otoniel has neither the strength nor power to dictate terms to these regional chiefs. They have their own protection teams, but in many areas rely on local *oficinas de cobro*, either rural or urban, to carry out specific criminal tasks. Many of the *oficinas de cobro* are also financially self-sufficient, and the regional chiefs may not have the ability to dictate terms to some of the stronger *oficinas*.

This, again, is a major difference between the Urabeños as a third-generation drug trafficking organization, and earlier structures such as that run by Pablo Escobar. Escobar was able to direct all those who formed part of the Medellín cartel. The AUC's *Estado Mayor* was also able, for the most part, to keep its members in line. Those who refused to toe the line, for example the Metro Bloc, led by Carlos Mauricio García, alias "00," were wiped out by other AUC elements.

Otoniel and the Urabeños central command have also declared war on elements that have refused to obey orders, including the *Oficina del Caribe* in the Sierra Nevada and Santa Marta. However, this war has not yet been totally won, and taking this kind of military action is very much a last resort. The Urabeños today largely rely on cooperation and consensus. The different nodes in the criminal network cooperate in the interests of illegal businesses, and will work for the highest bidder. The glue that keeps the network together is profit. This is the free market at its most unregulated.

The key to the Urabeños' expansion has been making agreements and alliances with other BACRIM and *oficinas de cobro*. Some of these still have their separate identity, while others have been absorbed into the wider Urabeños franchise. Following is a list of many of the groups that have become part of, or affiliated with, the Urabeños to date:

- Vencedores de San Jorge and Héroes de Castaño (Antioquia and Córdoba)
- Aguilas Negras (Antioquia, Córdoba, Bolívar, Cesar and Norte de Santander)
- Los Traquetos (Córdoba)
- Los Nevados (Atlántico and La Guajira)
- Paisas (Antioquia)

- BACRIM del Alta Guajira (Guajira)
- Oficina del Caribe (Atlántico and La Guajira)
- La Cordillera (Caldas, Risaralda, Quindío)
- Los Machos (Valle del Cauca)
- Renacer (Chocó)
- Oficina de Envigado (Medellín, Antioquia)
- Héroes de Vichada (Vichada, Guaviare, Meta)

Perhaps the best example of this type of criminal cooperation is the truce that was negotiated in Medellín. After the extradition of Don Berna in 2008, Medellín became a battleground, as rival factions of the Oficina de Envigado, each claiming the loyalty of combos and oficinas de cobro in their areas of influence, sought to claim Don Berna's throne. After the November 2011 capture of Valenciano -- one of the pretenders to the Medellín criminal throne -- the Urabeños also threw their hats into the ring, seeking to establish their own hegemony in the Antioquian capital. However, the fighting became drawn out, attracting the attention of law enforcement, and interrupting illegal activities. For this reason, many top level Medellín drug traffickers reached out to elements of the Oficina de Envigado and the Urabeños to broker a peace deal.

On July 13, 2013, members of different factions of the Oficina de Envigado met with Urabeños leaders at an estate in San Jerónimo, about an hour's drive from Medellín.³³ Negotiating on behalf of the Oficina were leaders representing at least 17 of the most powerful oficinas de cobro or, as the police refer to them, "ODINs" (Criminal Organizations Integrated With Drug Trafficking - Organizacion Delincuencial Integrada al Narcotrafico), and up to 120 different "combos." The Urabeños had four of their Medellín bosses, headed by alias "Don Daniel," a former AUC middle ranking commander. The meeting resulted in the signing of a truce and cooperation agreement, which has been respected to date. Indeed, in October 2013 the murder rate in Medellín reached the lowest levels seen in three decades.³⁴

The Oficina de Envigado is now affiliated with the Urabeños, and Medellín narco-traffickers use elements of both groups for their business. The relationship between the two BACRIM is mutually beneficial. The Oficina de Envigado controls much of the money laundering and contacts within Medellín, as well as drug distribution and extortion within the city. The rural-based Urabeños have access to drug crops, can protect laboratories, and can move drugs to departure points. Everybody in the criminal network wins.

Then there is the case of the Heroes of Vichada, one of the ERPAC dissident groups³⁵ that the government still recognizes as a BACRIM. Intelligence sources told InSight Crime that the Urabeños' Estado Mayor sent 150 men to support

³³ Jeremy McDermott, "Medellin Truce Inches Groups Closer to Criminal Hegemony," InSight Crime, October 4, 2013. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/mafia-truce-brokered-in-medellin>

³⁴ Semana, "La otra paz que vive en Medellín," November 30, 2013. <http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/pacto-de-paz-en-medellin/366521-3>

³⁵ Jeremy McDermott, "New Fighting for Colombia's Lucrative Eastern Plains," InSight Crime, February 12, 2013. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/new-round-war-colombia-eastern-plains>

Martín Farfán Díaz, alias "Pija Arvey," who heads the Vichada BACRIM, in his fight against another ERPAC dissident group, the Meta Bloc, led by Darío Andrés León alias "Jonathan." The Heroes of Vichada are still a real BACRIM, in the sense that they have a presence in more than one Colombian department, and run their own drug routes into neighboring Venezuela. However, they are now part of the Urabeños' criminal network, although Otoniel has no direct control over the group.

Who are the identified members of the Urabeños' "Estado Mayor," or Board of Directors?



Darío Antonio Úsuga David, alias "Otoniel," currently the "president" of the board.



Roberto Vargas Gutiérrez, alias "Gavilán"



Carlos Antonio Moreno Tuberquia, alias "Nicolás" (a former AUC paramilitary who is now a major drug trafficker)



Marcos de Jesús Figueroa García, alias "Marquitos" (runs operations in La Guajira)



Arley Úsuga Torres, alias "07" (captured). Following his arrest, his second-in-command, Luis Orlando Padierna, alias "Inglaterra," may have gotten a seat on the board.



Rafael Álvarez Piñeda, alias "Chepe" (captured). Chepe was the leader of a Paisas faction in Antioquia who joined the Urabeños.



Daniel Rendón Herrera, alias "Don Mario" (captured, but still believed to have contact with the group)

Alias "JJ" (believed to be a brother of Don Mario)

Alias "El Señor de la M" (a Medellín narco-trafficker with roots going back to the Medellín Cartel, one of the so-called "Invisibles").

Heads of allied BACRIM and powerful oficinas de cobro may also have a place on the Urabeños board. It is possible, for example, that Greylin Fernando Varon

Cadena, alias "Martin Bala," captured in May 2013 in Bogotá,³⁶ was a member of the Urabeños' Estado Mayor. From Cali, he was instrumental in the Urabeños' entry into the Valle del Cauca capital, and helped the Urabeños secure the loyalty of several oficinas de cobro in this Rastrojos heartland.

There are certainly others on the Urabeños board, and it will continue getting harder to identify Colombia's senior drug traffickers. The enforcers, such as the military wing of the Urabeños will, however, have to raise their heads above the parapet, as part of their job is to establish enough of a reputation to ensure their credibility and effectiveness in maintaining order in the underworld.

Areas still under dispute or outside the Urabeños franchise

While the Urabeños are far and away the principal criminal network in Colombia, they do not have total hegemony over drug trafficking in the country, even in the areas that are not under guerrilla control.

The war for control of Buenaventura, one of the two drug trafficking prizes on the Pacific Coast, is far from over. At one point last year, it seemed the most powerful oficina de cobro in the city, the Rastrojos-affiliated "La Empresa," had been beaten by the Urabeños and their local allies. However, that was not the case, as demonstrated by continued fighting and high levels of violence in the area.³⁷

The other prize on the Pacific Coast is the port of Tumaco in Nariño. Nariño is not only crucial as a departure point for drug shipments; it is also home to some of the most extensive coca plantations in the country. It is key drug trafficking real estate in part because it shares a long border with Ecuador, an important transshipment point for Colombian cocaine consignments. The Urabeños have made excursions into Nariño, but so far the group has been unable to establish a permanent presence there.

The department of Putumayo, also on the border with Ecuador, is another important location for the drug trade. Here, however, the FARC's mighty Southern Bloc holds sway, working with an oficina de cobro known as "La Construcción," which is made up of former paramilitaries and local criminals acting out of the towns of Puerto Asís and La Hormiga. The Urabeños have sent emissaries to the department, but will likely be unable to establish a permanent presence without the blessing of the FARC.

Another drug trafficking hotspot is the department of Norte de Santander, where elements of the Rastrojos still wield considerable influence. Here, both the Urabeños and the Rastrojos have begun operating across the Venezuelan border, as well as on the Colombian side.³⁸ The Urabeños, seeking to win over important

³⁶ Miriam Wells, "Urabeños Capture May Shakeup Turf War in South West Colombia," InSight Crime, May 30, 2013. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/urabenos-capture-may-shake-up-turf-war-in-southwest-colombia>

³⁷ James Bargent, "War for Cocaine Corridors Consumes Colombia's Busiest Port," InSight Crime, February 14, 2014. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/war-for-cocaine-corridors-consumes-colombias-busiest-port>

³⁸ James Bargent, "Assault against Urabeños Reveals Groups Move into Venezuela," InSight Crime, September 5, 2013. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/assault-against-urabenos-reveals-groups-move-into-venezuela>

oficinas de cobro in the city of Cúcuta, are hoping to establish hegemony over this crucial crossing point.

The Urabeños' war against the Oficina del Caribe saw Santa Marta emerge as one of the most dangerous cities in the country in 2012. Both sides have suffered heavy losses and seen key regional leaders arrested, including the Urabeños commander Belisario. The national reach of the Urabeños means they are better equipped for a long battle, as the much smaller and localized Oficina del Caribe cannot take sustained losses. This makes an eventual Urabeños victory the most likely outcome.³⁹

Holdout factions of the Rastrojos have also been battling the Urabeños in southern Chocó, causing mass displacements.⁴⁰ However, the region is increasingly falling under the control of the Urabeños-Renacer alliance.⁴¹

The International Element

The Urabeños are a transnational organized crime syndicate. InSight Crime has traced Urabeños emissaries, if not a permanent presence, in: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador,⁴² Honduras, Panama, Peru, Venezuela and Spain. Facing security force pressures at home, Colombian organized crime will continue to migrate, part of the "cockroach effect," which sees criminal move away from areas with effective security force presence to the "dark corners" where they can operate unmolested.

It is not a coincidence that many of the recent arrests of Urabeños leaders, or affiliated drug traffickers, have taken place outside of Colombia:

Maximiliano Bonilla Orozco, alias "Valenciano," an Urabeños ally who was a leader of the Oficina de Envigado and a faction of the Paisas, was captured in Venezuela in November 2011.

Alexander Montoya Úsuga, alias "El Flaco," was arrested in La Ceiba, Honduras in July 2012.

Henry De Jesús López Londoño, alias "Mi Sangre," was arrested in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in October 2012.

Jacinto Nicolás Fuentes Germán, alias "Don Leo," was arrested in Lima, Peru, while allegedly seeking to set up an arms smuggling pipeline, in February 2013.

John Fredy Manco Torres, alias "El Indio," an Urabeños-affiliated drug trafficker was arrested in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in, June 2013.

³⁹ James Bargent, "Arrests May Shake Up Urabeños War in Colombia's Caribbean," InSight Crime, February 13, 2013, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/urabenos-conflict-colombia-caribbean-los-giraldos>

⁴⁰ El Espectador, "Guerra entre 'Rastrojos' y 'Urabeños' deja pueblo fantasma en Choco," January 16, 2013, <http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/judicial/articulo-396941-guerra-entre-urabenos-y-rastrojos-deja-pueblo-fantasma-choco>

⁴¹ James Bargent, "Urabeños Absorb Local Crime Group in Colombia's Pacific," InSight Crime, March 25, 2013, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/urabenos-absorb-local-crime-group-in-colombias-pacific>

⁴² James Bargent, "Will Urabeños Bring Peace Among Ecuador's Crime Groups?" November 08, 2013, <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/will-urabenos-break-peace-among-ecuadors-crime-groups>

Carlos Andrés Palencia González, alias "Visaje," accused of setting up an Urabeños oficina de cobro in Spain, was arrested in Madrid in November 2013.⁴³

Corruption and BACRIM-politica

The Urabeños do not have the same institutional links to the military as their paramilitary predecessors, nor the nationwide power to be able to consistently corrupt elements of the security forces at the highest national levels. However, the Urabeños and their allies certainly can, and do, corrupt policemen, soldiers and members of the judiciary at the local, and perhaps even regional, level. There are some examples that stand this up:

- In June 2013, ten officials from the special investigations police (SIJIN), the military, the Technical Investigation Team (CTI) and the police were convicted of working with Renacer in Chocó. The officials were found to have provided intelligence on the movements of the security forces; sold munitions and provided arms to the group; staged false raids and captures; and informed the gang when arrest warrants were issued.⁴⁴
- In July 2013, eight police were arrested in Medellín and accused of working with a criminal network connected to the Oficina de Envigado. The officers, who were all patrolmen, were accused of giving advance warning to micro-trafficking networks ahead of raids on drug sales points. A local councilor was also arrested.⁴⁵
- In September 2013, a former prosecutor from Huila was charged with providing services to the Urabeños, along with corrupt politicians and businessmen. She stands accused of modifying, "disappearing," and throwing away documents related to criminal cases.⁴⁶

The same is true in the world of politics. While the AUC were able to boast control of over 30 percent of Colombia's Congress (and to date 60 congressmen have been charged in connection with the resulting para-politics scandal), the Urabeños do not have the strength, the ideological facade, nor probably even the intention of creating a nationwide political movement. However they are certainly interested in ensuring friendly candidates win posts at the municipal, departmental and even the national level in their areas of influence.

Perhaps the best example of this is in La Guajira. The governor of this department, Juan Francisco "Kiko" Gómez Cerchar, was arrested in October 2013 for numerous crimes, including ordering the murder of a town mayor and an indigenous leader in the region.⁴⁷ Gómez's alleged criminal ties also long predate the era of the

⁴³ Miriam Wells, "Are Urabeños Looking to Control Routes through Spain?" November 11, 2013.

<http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/top-urabenos-capture-in-spain-points-to-groups-expansion>

⁴⁴ Territorio Chocano, "A la cárcel miembros de la Fuerza Pública y el Ejército por nexos con bacrim," June 13, 2013,

<http://www.territoriochocano.com/secciones/orden-publico/2382-a-la-carcel-miembros-de-la-fuerza-publica-y-el-ejercito-por-nexos-con-bacrim.html>

⁴⁵ ADN, "Detienen un concejal y 8 policías por nexos con Bacrim," July 12, 2013, <http://diarioadn.co/medell%C3%ADn/mi-ciudad/detienen-a-concejal-de-envigado-y-8-polic%C3%ADas-por-nexos-con-bacrim-1.67838>

⁴⁶ La Nación, "A juicio ex fiscal de Nieva por nexos con las bacrim," September 24, 2013,

<http://www.lanacion.com.co/index.php/noticias-judicial/item/223008-a-juicio-ex-fiscal-de-neiva-por-nexos-con-las-bacrim>

⁴⁷ Miriam Wells, "Colombia Governor Arrested for Multiple Murders, Crime Links," InSight Crime, October 14, 2013,

<http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/colombia-governor-arrested-for-multiple-murders-crime-links>

BACRIM, and according to a classified government report seen by *Semana*,⁴⁸ he was long suspected of ties to contraband, gasoline and drug trafficking, and had contacts with the AUC's Northern Bloc. After the demobilization of the AUC and the rise of the BACRIM, Gómez continued to seek out the backing of armed groups, according to numerous sources, and struck up an alliance with Marcos Figueroa, alias "Marquitos," a major player in the La Guajira underworld, who is now part of the Urabeños network.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ *Semana*, "Un gobernador de miedo un La Guajira," May 4, 2013, <http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/un-gobernador-miedo-la-guajira/342196-3>

⁴⁹ *Semana*, "La Guajira: sin dio ni ley," May 2, 2013, <http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/la-guajira-dios-ni-ley/344339-3>
www.InSightCrime.org

5. The future of the BACRIM and post-conflict Colombia

While the Urabeños are presently established as Colombia's top drug trafficking group, it remains to be seen how the evolution of organized crime in Colombia, and the future of the BACRIM, will play out. Below are some predictions.

The president of the Urabeños board of directors, Otoniel, will fall. It is not a question of "if," simply "when." He not only has the invigorated Colombian police intelligence apparatus chasing him, but international agencies including the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).

There are others within the Urabeños heartland that will be able to step up, and create another command module. Gavilán is probably that man. However, the strength of the Urabeños has been in its core of former EPL and paramilitary fighters, men with a long criminal experience, military training, and the ability to win the hearts and minds of many of the local communities in which they operate. This pool of hardened criminals is drying up, as a result of captures, violence and internal disputes. The new recruits for the Urabeños tend to be common criminals. They do not have the discipline or training of their predecessors, meaning the quality of the Urabeños' recruitment pool is getting diluted.

It is likely that over time the domination of those from Urabá will diminish, and this region will become just another criminal fiefdom, perhaps losing the "presidency" of the criminal board of directors. However the nature of this criminal network is such that it can quickly shift and recompose itself around other command nodes, making it almost impossible for the Colombian national police to dismantle the network in its entirety. The best the police can hope for is to target the command nodes as they appear, and undermine the finances of this group and other criminal organizations, which is a slow and long-term project. The successes against the drug trade must also be replicated in the other criminal industries that fund the different levels of the BACRIM. Current priorities, for example, should include the illegal gold trade and extortion, primary sources of earning for oficinas de cobro across the country.

A new dynamic may well enter the Colombian underworld in 2014. At least 200 AUC leaders are due to leave prison during the year,⁵⁰ having served the eight years specified under the Peace and Justice legislation. One of those who may be eligible for release is Fredy Rendón, alias "El Aleman," brother of "Don Mario" and of alias "JJ" both of who are Urabeños board members. The temptation to return to criminal life may be too great for some of these paramilitary fighters, who have great experience, criminal contacts and influence in the areas they operate in. They could either boost BACRIM power, or set off power struggles, creating more violence.

⁵⁰ Semana, " Los 200 'paras' que saldrán de la cárcel," January 25, 2014. <http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/paramilitares-que-saldran-cobijados-por-la-ley-de-justicia-paz/371920-3>

Then of course there is the wild card, the Marxist rebels. The FARC, if they wanted, could become the most powerful drug trafficking organization overnight. The ruling body of the FARC, the seven-man Secretariat, denies any involvement in drug trafficking. The Secretariat members are well aware that drug trafficking is their most important earner, but it is left in the hands of front commanders rather than being directed from above, to allow the top leadership to deny involvement in the trade. The only bloc commander who took direct control of the drug trade at a higher level was Victor Julio Suarez, alias "Mono Jojoy."

This means that the FARC's drug trafficking activities are not centrally coordinated. If they were, and the FARC decided to take control of drug trafficking in Colombia, they could do so, and quickly. The FARC, along with their ELN and EPL allies, have a stranglehold over coca cultivations. If they chose to stop selling coca base to the BACRIM, the Urabeños would find their drug trafficking operations crippled.

This raises the possibility of the criminalization of the guerrillas, and the birth of the "FARCRIM" following peace negotiations with the government. This subject has been discussed in detail in another InSight Crime paper, "The FARC, Peace and Possible Criminalization."⁵¹ It is inevitable that some elements of the guerrillas will criminalize. What is still to be determined is whether these elements will join the existing Urabeños criminal network, or set up a rival network, which would inevitably lead to confrontation and further violence. During interviews conducted on the Medellín truce, between the Oficina de Envigado and the Urabeños, it became clear that factions of the Oficina perceived the criminalization of guerrilla elements to be the greatest threat to their long term future.

The guerrillas could become a drug cartel in the true sense of the word. They could gain control over all the links in the drug chain, from crops up to exportation of cocaine shipments. They have the military power to take on and defeat any rival criminal elements that stand in their way. There is already evidence to suggest that the Mexican cartels are seeking to cut out the BACRIM middlemen and negotiate directly with the FARC. There are signs of this specifically with the FARC's 36th and 57th Fronts in Antioquia and Chocó, the 29th and 30th Fronts in Nariño and Valle del Cauca, and the 48th Front in Putumayo. The guerrillas could set up a criminal network to rival that of the Urabeños -- one with greater territorial control, a monopoly over drug crops, and a military machine that even the state has yet to defeat.

The BACRIM's greatest opportunities for growth may lie abroad, and as criminal migration occurs, it is clear that elements of the Urabeños franchise are establishing access to coca and cocaine supplies in both Peru and Bolivia.

The growing internal drug markets of Brazil and Argentina offer enormous opportunities, and quick rewards. The process of sending drugs to the United States and Europe is complicated, involving shipments passing through many hands, entailing high risks of seizure and betrayal, and a need to repatriate money.

⁵¹ See the InSight Crime special investigation at <http://www.insightcrime.org/special-series/peace-with-farc>

Smuggling cocaine or even cocaine paste into other Latin American nations, on the other hand, involves far less risk and more immediate payment.

Additionally, the opportunities in Europe are about to greatly increase for Colombian organized crime, with the lifting of the Schengen visa restrictions on Colombian nationals. This will allow the Urabeños network, which already has oficinas de cobro in Spain, to burst across Europe. The Colombians will thus be able to move further down the drug trafficking chain and get involved in distribution, meaning that the margins on every kilo of cocaine smuggled could rise significantly. This might allow the BACRIM to recover similar levels of profits from cocaine to those enjoyed by the first and second generation drug trafficking organizations.

Criminal and law enforcement sources consulted in Bolivia gave accounts illustrative of the new tendencies for Colombian transnational organized crime. Some spoke of Santa Cruz as the "new Medellín." Here, Colombian criminal elements have set up shop, processing coca base flown in from Peru, as well as that gathered within Bolivia. They then deliver it either to Brazilian criminal groups, for distribution in Brazil, or move it to Colombian elements located in Argentina, for local distribution or for shipment to Europe and other destinations.

Currently, this business remains low profile. The members of Colombia's transnational criminal networks do not strut around brandishing gold-plated Uzi machine guns. Instead, they are armed with iPhones and the latest generation encryption programs. They are, to all outward appearances, successful businessmen, buying and selling legal, as well as illegal, commodities. They are the drug traffickers of the present and the future. They still need access to criminal muscle like that provided by the Urabeños, but they prefer cooperation, persuasion and consensus to violence. This means they attract little attention, and have become very good at carrying out their business under the radar, beyond the prying eyes of national and international law enforcement.

Colombian organized crime, currently represented by the Urabeños, remains a pioneering force in the international illegal narcotics trade. However, it is becoming increasingly hard to spot it.